



***ALYTAUS KOLEGIJOS***  
**VEIKLOS VERTINIMO IŠVADOS**

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**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW REPORT OF**  
***ALYTUS COLLEGE***

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I hereby certify that this is the final text of the institutional review report of Alytus College



*Bastian Baumann*

## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The purpose of the external review is to determine the quality of the performance of a higher education institution based on the findings of the external review, to create prerequisites for improvement of the performance of a higher education institution, to promote a culture of quality, and to inform founders, academic community and the society about the quality of higher education institutions.

2. This review report is based on the evidence given in the self-evaluation report, additional evidence requested by the panel, information provided by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (hereafter referred to as SKVC) and a site visit, where meetings with a wide range of stakeholders were held.

3. The Panel was appointed in accordance with the Experts Selection Procedure approved by [Order No. V-149](#) of the Director of SKVC of 31 December 2019 and composed of the following members:

- Prof. Bastian Baumann (Chair): Managing Director of the European Quality Assurance Agency (EQA), Managing Director Shbeemann Consulting; Germany
- Ms. Ewa Kolanowska (Secretary): independent consultant, Poland; ENQA reviewer;
- Assoc. Prof. Dr Alberto De Marco (Academic): Associate Professor, Department of Management and Production Engineering, Politecnico di Torino, Italy;
- Prof. Dr. Hannele Tiittanen (Academic): Principal Lecturer in the field of Nursing and Senior Adviser, LAB University of Applied Science, Finland;
- Mr. Audrius Jasėnas (Social Partner): Innovation expert, Director of the SMART Manufacturing Technology Center „Intechcentras“, Lithuania; SKVC reviewer;
- Mr. Ivan Jusis (Student): BA and MA in the fields of Law and Business Management; student of General Nursing Practice, Klaipėda State College.

4. As a result of the external review, **Alytus College** is given a **negative evaluation**.

5. Judgment by the area:

Area	Assessment with points*
MANAGEMENT	1
QUALITY ASSURANCE	2
STUDIES AND RESEARCH (ART)	2
IMPACT ON REGIONAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	3

\*5 points - **excellent** – the area is rated exceptionally well in the national context and internationally;

4 points – **very good** – the area is rated very well in the national context and internationally, without any drawbacks;

3 points – **good** – the area is being developed systematically, without any major drawbacks;

2 points – **satisfactory** – the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are drawbacks that must be addressed;

1 point - **unsatisfactory** – the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are fundamental drawbacks.

6. **Two** examples of good practices were found; **twenty-eight** recommendations are given and **twenty-four** suggestions for improvement are made.

## II. INTRODUCTION

### 2.1. Background of the review process

7. The external review of Alytus College (*Alytaus Kolegija*) (hereafter referred to as AC or the College) was organised by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education and carried out in 2021 by an international panel of experts (the Panel). It was conducted in accordance with the Procedure for the External Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Branches of Foreign Higher Education Institutions, Evaluation Areas and Indicators (the Procedure) approved by [Order No. V-1529](#) of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania of 19 December 2019 and the Methodology for Conducting an Institutional Review in Higher Education (the Methodology) approved by [Order No V-32](#) of the Director of SKVC of 9 March 2020.

8. In accordance with the Procedure, the external review consists of the following stages: submission of a self-evaluation report prepared by a higher education institution to SKVC; formation of an expert panel and analysis of the self-evaluation report; expert panel visit to the institution; preparation of an external review report and publication thereof; follow-up activities aimed at improving the performance of the institution, taking into account the external review report.

9. At the preparatory stage of the external review, the Panel received AC's Self-Evaluation Report (SER) with annexes, and requested additional documents (2020 Annual Report; annexes to the Quality Manual; 2018 external report on the Quality Management System; summaries of student course evaluation findings, the regulation on the incentives for AC teachers to conduct applied research and other activities; data such as the number of ongoing study programmes, teacher/student ratios, student dropout rates). SKVC provided to the Panel additional information about the College, as set in the Methodology (Chapter 26), including statistical data on students and staff; financial data; findings from the ex-ante and ex-post programme reviews, institutional reviews and evaluations of research and development activities; State-budget allocations for research activities; information on potential violations of academic ethics from the Office of the Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures of the Republic of Lithuania. The Panel also received information on complaints from AC students and community, sent to SKVC, and information on AC, provided by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, including the 2020 audit report of the Ministry's Central Internal Audit Service.

10. The site visit was undertaken after a training session organised by SKVC staff and preparatory panel meetings. The Panel visited AC between 9 and 11 November 2021 where it had meetings with key stakeholders, including the governing bodies, heads of faculties and departments, staff, students, graduates and social partners. **Due to the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic situation, the review visit was organised online using video-conferencing tool** provided by SKVC. Subsequently, the Panel met to discuss review findings and agree conclusions and recommendations. The review report was finalised by correspondence and submitted to SKVC.

11. In line with the Methodology, the external review focused on four areas covered by the evaluation indicators (and related criteria): **management, quality assurance, studies and research (art) and impact on regional and national development**. In analysing the evidence collected, the Panel also gave due consideration to the recommendations of the previous review which took place in 2011.

12. The review of a higher education institution assesses each of the evaluation areas with one of five ratings: **excellent** – 5 points – the area is rated exceptionally well in the national context and internationally; **very good** – 4 points – the area is rated very well in the national context and internationally, without any drawbacks; **good** – 3 points – the area is developed systematically, without any major drawbacks; **satisfactory** – 2 points – the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are drawbacks that must be addressed; **unsatisfactory** – 1 point – the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are fundamental drawbacks.

13. The decision on **positive** evaluation is made when none of the evaluation areas is evaluated unsatisfactorily (1 point). The decision on **negative** evaluation is made when at least one of the evaluation areas is evaluated unsatisfactory (1 point).

14. In line with the Methodology, the review report, prepared by the Panel is reviewed by SKVC and sent to the higher education institution to comment on factual errors and the evaluations based thereon. The Panel revises the report in response to the comments from the higher education institution (if applicable) and submits it to SKVC.

15. The Panel received and considered the comments from AC. As a result, ten changes were made to the report. However, most of them are minor adjustments where AC provided additional details that did not affect the Panel's judgment of the aspect discussed. The comments received from the College are referred to in the relevant paragraphs of the review report.

16. After the Panel considers comments from the higher education institution (if applicable) and finalises the report, the report is considered by the external Commission of the Higher Education Institutions Review (the Commission), set up by SKVC. On the basis of the proposal, made by the Commission, provisioned in the Commission's regulations, approved by the Order No. V-5 of the Director of SKVC on 8 January 2020, SKVC takes one of the decisions:

- to evaluate the performance of the higher education institution positively;
- to evaluate the performance of the higher education institution negatively.

The decisions of SKVC may be appealed against to the Commission for Appeals, formed by SKVC. Subsequently, the decisions of SKVC and the Commission for Appeals may be appealed against in accordance with the procedure established by the Law on Administrative Proceedings of the Republic of Lithuania.

17. On the basis of the external review decision SKVC takes one of the following decisions on the **accreditation** of the higher education institution:

- to **accredit for a period of seven years** if performance of the higher education institution is evaluated positively;

- to **accredit for a period of three years** if performance of the higher education institution is evaluated negatively;
- to **deny accreditation** if the repeated external review results of the higher education institution are negative.

18. SKVC announces the decision on the external review together with the conclusions of the external review and the decision on the accreditation of the higher education institution on its website. The higher education institution respectively announces the decision on the evaluation of the higher education institution together with the external review report on its website and maintains it until the next external review.

## 2.1. Background information about the institution

19. Alytus College is a state college situated in Alytus in southern Lithuania. It was established under its present name in 2000 when the Law on Higher Education introduced a binary higher education system of colleges and universities. Its origins date back to 1960 when Alytus Mechanical Technical School was established and later transformed into Alytus Polytechnic.

20. AC currently offers thirteen Professional Bachelor's degree programmes in five fields of study: (1) *Business and Public Administration*: Accounting; Business Management; Office and Enterprise Administration; and Transport and Logistics Business; (2) *Computing*: Information Systems; Information Systems Technologies; Multimedia and Visual Communication; Multimedia, Design and Publishing Technologies; and Virtual Technologies. (3) *Technology*: Food Technology; (4) *Engineering Sciences*: Building Engineering Systems; and Automobile Transport Engineering; (5) *Health Sciences*: Physiotherapy; and General Practice Nursing. Two programmes (Information Systems Technology, and General Nursing) are offered in Lithuanian and English. Degree programmes are provided by the Faculty of Information Technologies and Management (Departments of Information Technologies, and Management), and the Faculty of Health Sciences and Engineering (Departments of Health Sciences and Technologies, and Engineering). Both Faculties are located in Alytus.

21. AC also provides lifelong learning or non-formal education courses and runs seminars and other knowledge-sharing events for specific professional groups (e.g. civil servants, school education staff and enterprise staff) and the general public. Courses and seminars are organised by the Applied Research and Non-Formal/Formal Education Centre and the Teacher Qualification Improvement Division. Three other units are involved in training, research, consultancy and / or other activities: Regional Technology Centre, Regional STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics) Open Centre, and Junior IT Specialists Academy.

22. Support and administrative services are provided by the Study Centre (responsible for student administration and support); Information and Self-Study Centre (a library or resource centre), Marketing Centre (career guidance; graduate tracking); Quality Assurance Department; International Relations and Projects Centre; Europe Direct Information Centre;

and the Human Resources and Document Management, Accounting, Digital Technologies, Maintenance and Supply, and Procurement Departments; and Hostel and Catering Complex.

23. In the academic year 2021/2022, AC has 708 students; the number of students has risen by more than 10% compared to 633 in 2019/2020 and 634 in 2020/2021. In 2020/2021, 470 (74%) students were enrolled on programmes offered by the Faculty of Health Sciences and Engineering, and 164 (26%) on programmes in the Faculty of Information Technologies and Management. Full-time and part-time students represented, respectively, 67% and 33% of the total AC student population. The number of full-time and part-time students as a proportion of all students in each faculty varied from 75% and 25%, respectively, in the Faculty of Health Sciences and Engineering to 42% and 58%, respectively, in the Faculty of Information and Technologies and Management.

24. In 2020/2021, AC employed 80 academic staff (compared to 75 in 2018/2019 and 78 in 2019/2020) and 34 administrative staff (36 in 2018/2019 and 37 in 2019/2020).

25. AC underwent its previous external review in 2011. Following the review, the College was accredited for 6 years by Order No. SV6-35 of the Director of SKVC of 14 August 2012. Pursuant to the Law on Research and Higher Education and Order No. SR-3411 of the Minister of Education and Science of 1 August 2018 on the Extension of the Term of Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions, the validity period of AC's accreditation was extended by the SKVC Director's Order No. SV6-32 of 2 August 2018 until the subsequent external review.

### III. ANALYSIS BY EVALUATION AREA

#### 3.1. Management

*Management* area is analysed in accordance to the following indicators and criteria, set up in the Methodology.

*1.1. Compliance of the higher education institution's strategic action plan with the mission, assurance of its implementation:*

*1.1.1. The strategic action plan is consistent with the mission of the higher education institution, legal acts regulating research and study activities and it takes into account the provisions of the national research and study policy, the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area;*

*1.1.2. The parts of the strategic action plan (analysis of the current situation, priorities and aims, objectives of the activities, implementation means, resources, planned performance indicators) are appropriate and justified;*

*1.1.3. Regular monitoring of the implementation of the strategic action plan is carried out and the results are used to improve performance management.*

26. The vision of AC is “to become a regional higher education institution which actively and successfully operates internationally and nationally as a centre of applied research and culture, fosters the country's national culture and traditions, being socially responsible and open to the society”. In its mission, the College seeks “to provide high quality higher education studies

based on professional practice and applied research, experimental development and create conditions for lifelong learning”. AC might wish to consider whether its vision statement is fully consistent in highlighting the regional character of the institution on the one hand and its aspirations to achieve national and international impact on the other hand. The mission statement accurately describes what the College does. It is, however, rather generic, essentially restating the objectives or tasks set for colleges in the Law on Higher Education and Research of the Republic of Lithuania; it does not set directions that would embrace the unique features of the College and could also help it attract students, other young and adult learners and social partners. Hence, the mission statement is not suitable for being used as a guide for the development of specific strategic objectives.

27. The 2020-2022 Strategic Development Plan (SDP) of AC does not contradict the mission due to its generic nature. However, it does not include any specific measures related to lifelong learning. It embraces elements of the National Education Strategy 2013-2022 and Lithuania’s Progress Strategy “Lithuania 2030” such as the quality and internationalisation of education; continuous improvement of teachers’ skills; labour market relevance of study programmes; and integration of education, research and business. These elements also link the SDP to the priorities of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). Nevertheless, AC would benefit from an internal discussion on how it can better integrate European policies into its strategic plans. The SDP makes no explicit reference to the ERA and addresses the EHEA priorities such as social dimension of higher education and student-centred learning only in its context analysis. The AC Self-Evaluation Group, which represented all internal stakeholders, could not explicitly explain to the Panel how the College is pursuing European policies. The Panel was under the impression that AC did not reflect deeply on how they would prioritise and implement specific policies, but rather that it was essential to name policies.

28. The overall strategic goal of AC defined in the SDP is to provide high-quality programmes leading to a higher education qualification, to create conditions for lifelong learning by boosting internationalisation, and to develop applied research activities. Except for a reference to internationalisation, the goal does not go beyond the mission statement to set a clear direction for the development of AC between 2020 and 2022. The strategic goal itself is also very vague, as the SDP does not provide any details as to what constitutes “high-quality programmes”. According to the SDP, this is to be achieved through two programmes: Implementation of higher education programmes and development of applied research activities; and Improvement of Activities and Development of Strategic Partnerships. The specific objectives of the two programmes are very broadly defined and thus are not suitable to effectively guide activities (e.g. to provide study programmes corresponding to the needs of the regional labour market and society; improve activities of the College; increase cooperation with business and local government; conduct successful international activities). During the interviews, AC representatives were not able to explain how the SDP concretely translates into activities of the College, thereby providing the impression to the Panel that the SDP, although devised to comply with the requirements, is not used as a living document that is actually guiding institutional policies, activities and developments.

29. AC states in its response to the review report that the SDP was developed in accordance with the Strategic Planning Methodology approved by the Government (Resolution No 827 of 6 June 2002 "On the Approval of the Strategic Planning Methodology"). The SDP does indeed include the required components and, as AC confirmed in its response, annual activity plans are drawn up in accordance with the structure of the SDP. However, in the Panel's view, the SDP does not set an appropriate strategic framework for the development of the College nor provides tools for measuring its performance, or a sound basis for annual activity plans. The context analysis outlines external factors at the national level, but fails to clearly address what are the implications for and required reactions of AC. In addition, a more in-depth analysis of the regional context would be required, since, as stated in the SDP, 70% of AC students come from, and 85% of graduates find employment in, the Alytus and neighbouring districts. There is no evidence-based analysis of the internal environment and, in particular, of the performance of the College in the core areas of its activity (higher education, lifelong learning; applied research, consulting services), internationalisation, and of the human, financial and learning resources available to support the core activities. This may explain why the strategic objectives are not sufficiently specific to guide actions and are not SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) objectives, and the SDP fails to identify clear development priorities (e.g. areas for study programmes, applied research, lifelong learning). The SDP would also benefit from an estimation of costs, in addition to expected subsidies. The indicators focus on inputs (e.g. number of projects, agreements; income generated) rather than outcomes and impact and are often not clearly related to the strategic objectives, as these remain "high-level". The quantitative indicators are accompanied by very few ones that could be considered qualitative. The target values for the indicators referring to the expected number of students and graduates are not based on a systematic labour market analysis (see the sections on Studies and Research and Impact on national and regional development). Generally, the target values are not systematically aligned with the strategic objectives, as they do not focus on consistent growth or improvement. Also, during the interviews, the Panel did not receive information how the target values had been defined and selected. The need to set clear development priorities and qualitative indicators was already highlighted in the related recommendation from the previous external institutional review. The recommendation was not systematically followed-up by AC.

30. In line with the related 2011 institutional review recommendation, AC put in place a formal procedure for the development of strategic plans. All stakeholder groups were involved in the development of the SDP through their representatives on a working group; the Plan was approved by the Council, as provided for in the AC Statutes. However, the flaws in the SDP indicate that AC does not yet have a suitable methodology for evidence-based strategic planning. As stakeholders explained to the Panel, the SDP is drafted on the basis of national and regional policy documents and discussions with social partners; priorities emerge in response to the needs identified by social partners. Yet, AC was unable to explain how this is done concretely. Consequently, the annual resource allocation process is not clearly linked to the strategic objectives (see the comments below).

31. Progress in the implementation of the SDP is monitored during the year in meetings between the Director and Deans of the Faculties held three times a year and reviewed

annually. The monitoring process is largely informal and undocumented. The annual review is based on annual reports, prepared at the unit level and, subsequently, at the institutional level; where improvements are necessary, an action plan is prepared. The 2020 Annual Activity Report demonstrates that the target values for most of the indicators set in the SDP for 2020 were either achieved or exceeded. However, the Report is largely descriptive, with little analysis of the data for the performance of the College in the core areas of its activity (higher education, applied research, lifelong learning) that could provide the basis for improvements. This may explain why the monitoring and review processes have led to few improvements, mainly in institutional management processes (see below).

*1.2. Effectiveness of process management of the higher education institution:*

- 1.2.1. A clear structure for governance, decision-making and distribution of responsibilities is defined;*
- 1.2.2. Regular process management analysis is performed, preconditions for process improvement and risk management are planned;*
- 1.2.3. Stakeholders are involved in the management process at an adequate level.*

32. The AC Statutes set out a transparent governance structure, including the Council, Academic Council and the Director as the governing bodies, Deputy Directors, Deans of Faculty, Faculty Boards and Heads of Departments, and clear procedures for the appointment to the governing bodies, and middle-management bodies and positions. However, the 2020 audit conducted by the Central Internal Audit Service of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport detected irregularities in the appointment of members of the Academic Council, Deans of Faculties and Heads of Departments and the proceedings of the Council and Academic Council. Although the issue of appointments was discussed during the interviews, the Panel was not in a position to verify whether all the irregularities were rectified; this would have required a legal compliance analysis of documentation exceeding the terms of reference for an external review, as defined in the Methodology. In its response to the review report, AC states that it submitted to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport a report on the actions taken to address the issues identified in the 2020 audit report.

33. AC provided inconsistent evidence concerning representatives of students on its Council. During its site visit, the Panel was informed that students were represented on the Council only by a graduate; thus, the current composition of the Council, would not comply with the requirement of the Law on Higher Education and Research, whereby students should have two representatives on the Council. However, in its response to the review report, AC states that the Council members include a student. Leaving aside the legal requirement, the Panel is aware that the AC internal regulations allow a graduate to represent students, this is not considered problematic by the students whom the Panel met, and AC emphasises in its response to the report that it is not allowed to interfere in the process of the AC Student Association appointing its representatives to the Council. Nevertheless, in the Panel's view, the Student Association could reconsider this arrangement as it does not ensure adequate representation and active participation of students in governance; students and graduates are two distinct stakeholder groups, each with specific interests to be voiced and safeguarded.

Direct participation would also enable students to develop analytical and critical thinking skills and competences for future working life.

34. Leaving aside the legal aspects, all of the top- and middle-level management positions are taken by staff who have worked in the College for a fairly long time. This enables AC to benefit from institutional memory and continuity, but also limits the space for challenging ingrained management patterns. It also poses the danger, in combination with many informal and undocumented processes, that institutional memory is attached to individuals and not to AC as such. Since there is currently a vacancy for one of the two Deputy Director positions, AC may consider looking for a suitable external candidate to provide fresh insights.

35. Despite a clear division of responsibilities between the governing bodies in the Statutes, the lines of responsibility are not equally clear in practice, and the governing bodies fail to effectively perform some of their strategic management functions. Although AC states in its response to the review report that the SDP was prepared in accordance with the Government's Strategic Planning Methodology, the Panel's comments on the quality of the SDP above indicate that an appropriate methodology for evidence-based strategic planning has yet to be developed in collaboration between the Director and the Council as the responsible bodies. In its meeting with the Panel, the Council acknowledged that much needs to be done to improve the collection and analysis of data and feedback for goal setting and to provide conditions for the achievement of goals. The Academic Council does not have a clear methodology to assess the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system or to evaluate the quality and results of applied research. It relies mainly on annual activity reports, based on quantitative indicators, and anecdotal feedback collected from students and social partners. (See also the Quality Assurance section) The Panel also agrees with the Council that communication between the Council and the Academic Council should be improved to maximise synergy and avoid the duplication of effort.

36. Each of the governing bodies submits an annual activity report, but no formal mechanism is in place for the evaluation of their effectiveness. As explained to the Panel, AC relies on informal feedback on their performance provided by internal and external stakeholders.

37. Decision-making in the College is highly centralised. The Deans and Faculty Boards can take independent decisions only regarding the selection of academic staff as part of the recruitment process, collaboration with social partners, and the mode of study during the COVID-19 pandemic. This does not undermine efficiency in decision-making, as the College is small and much of the day-to-day business as part of operational management is done on an informal basis. Nonetheless, the College may consider delegating more responsibilities and decision-making powers to the faculty level; this would also allow the governing bodies to focus on their strategic management functions.

38. Process management is regulated by the Activity Planning and Analysis Procedure and the Non-Conformities and Corrective Action Procedure laid down in the Quality Manual, which include planning, annual review and follow-up action. According to the Manual, planning is based on the SDP and an annual review on previous review decisions, and an analysis of external and internal factors, data collected (SDP indicators, stakeholder feedback), adequacy of resources, action taken to mitigate risks and opportunities for

improvement identified. This would provide the basis for identifying opportunities for improvements and corrective actions to be taken. However, the SDP does not provide an appropriate framework for planning (see above), and the Panel found little evidence that AC analyses systematically the data collected to evaluate its performance and inform decision-making (see the comments on below). The range of data collected is also too limited for a thorough evaluation of the performance of the College. The number of audits gradually decreased from 11 in 2016 to 2 in 2020, following improvements made in process management, as the Management Team explained to the Panel during the visit. For the comments on the SDP indicators, see above. There is no formal mechanism for regular collection of feedback from students and staff on institutional matters, and social partners provide feedback largely on an informal basis (see the Quality Assurance section.).

39. According to the Quality Manual, risk management is part of the Activity Planning and Analysis processes; an algorithm defined in the Manual identifies a risk when it occurs, and a risk management plan is prepared. In the Panel's view, this approach to risk management is more reactive than pro-active. While AC states in its response to the review report that the Panel was not sufficiently thorough in exploring the issue of risk management, the Panel sought to collect relevant evidence in the meeting with the Management Team (the Director and the Deputy Director) and in the final clarification meeting with the Management Team. In response to its questions about risk management in the first meeting, the Panel learned that AC relied on its quality management system, including audits, to identify management problems; if identified, problems would be discussed by the Directorate. In the second meeting, the Management Team referred again in broad terms to the quality management system and discussions within the Directorate, and to the algorithm mentioned in the Quality Manual. When asked about three main risks, the Management Team identified only external risks that the College is currently facing: the COVID-19 pandemic, the migration crisis on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border and cybersecurity, the last one mitigated by the recent purchase of necessary equipment and software. There was no indication that AC had considered strategic, operational, financial, academic or reputational risks. Its response to the review report refers to a Risk Management Plan, but the document was not mentioned in the meetings (and, thus, not requested by the Panel), and the Panel is not allowed to examine any additional document after the site visit. However, it encourages the College to consider whether its Risk Management Plan could usefully integrate a risk register: a document that details at least all categories of identified risks, including strategic, operational, reputational, financial, academic and political risks, and their causes, probability of occurring, impact and mitigation measures.

40. Despite the shortcomings noted above, the annual process management reviews led to structural and organisational changes between 2016 and 2021. These include, for example, the restructuring of the two Faculties, with new departments established; the establishment of the International Relations and Projects Centre to boost internationalisation, the Human Resources and Document Management Department to ensure more rational use of human resources, and the Study Centre as a one-stop shop responsible for student administration and support; and the transfer of some functions to the Study Centre to allow the Deans to focus on the quality of education rather than organisational matters. A wider range of relevant data

analysed as part of annual reviews would allow AC to identify potential improvements in management in the core areas of its activity (see Research and studies and Impact on national and regional development).

41. AC staff and students as the main internal stakeholders, and external stakeholders, including representatives of other higher education institutions and social partners, are involved in the management process through their representatives on the Council and the Academic Council at the institutional level, and the Faculty Boards and Study Programme Committees (responsible for programme development and review) at the unit level, and other ad-hoc committees or working groups. Currently, however, as noted above, students are not adequately represented on the Council by a graduate.

*1.3. Publicity of information on the performance of the higher education institution and its management effectiveness:*

*1.3.1. Systematic collection and analysis of the performance data, results (including student employment and graduate career monitoring) is in place, data is used for the improvement of performance of the higher education institution;*

*1.3.2. Information on the performance of the higher education institution is clear, accurate and accessible to the academic community and the public, and is provided regularly to the founders and members of the legal entity.*

42. AC collects and analyses data in accordance with the Document and Records Management Procedure. Data is collected at the unit level and compiled by the Human Resources and Document Management Department at the institutional level, and analysed on an annual basis. For graduate monitoring, AC uses its own data gathered through surveys, conducted 6 months, 12 months and 3 years after graduation, and interviews, and data provided by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour.

43. The 2020 Annual Activity Report shows that AC collects a wide range of data, extending beyond the indicators defined in its SDP. However, the Panel did not find convincing evidence in the Annual Report or during the site visit that the available disaggregate data collected at the unit or study programme level and / or aggregate data compiled at the institutional level is analysed critically and in-depth with a view to being used to evaluate and improve performance and inform decision-making. In the meetings with the Panel, the representatives of the top- and middle-level management could not convincingly explain what data is used to set strategic goals and priorities and, in general, in decision-making, and referred mainly to the indicators in the SDP and, in broad terms, to feedback collected from students and social partners. There is no indication in the SDP that its goals are based on an analysis of data about the performance of the College (see the related comments above). The responsible bodies and units acknowledged to the Panel that the available data is not cross-referenced to evaluate comparatively and improve the performance of the individual study programmes or of the individual units in applied research. Relevant data (e.g. trends in student enrolment; feedback provided in student surveys and internship reports; findings from external programme evaluations; graduate employment rates) are readily available for such an analysis. (See the related comments, based on the available data, in the Studies and Research section.)

44. Furthermore, although AC states in its SER and its response to the review report that it collects and analyses data on its ongoing activities in all areas, the sections on Studies and research and Impact on national and regional development in this review report demonstrate that the College does not collect systematically data that is necessary for strategic decision-making. This includes, for example, data for the assessment of labour market needs to be used in study programme planning and management, and for the assessment of regional needs to be used in planning applied research, consultancy and lifelong learning activities.

45. Information on the performance of the College is provided in annual activity reports which are discussed with the Council and the Academic Council and published on the AC website. Key data is provided to the national, regional and local authorities, as required by law. Based on the 2020 Report, annual activity reports contain a comprehensive description of the College's activities (insofar as this is possible based on the data currently collected). However, they are descriptive rather than analytical, as noted earlier; hence, very few, if any, areas for improvement identified, and no recommendations or plans for follow-up actions – such information should also be available to the stakeholders. Although reports are published, the Panel's meetings with some of the internal stakeholders indicate that AC could make greater effort to disseminate information about its performance within its community.

#### *1.4. Effectiveness of human resource management:*

*1.4.1. Clear and transparent principles and procedures for the formation, management, evaluation of academic and non-academic staff are established and applied;*

*1.4.2. The higher education institution has sufficient academic (in-house academic staff) and non-academic staff to meet its operational objectives;*

*1.4.3. The qualifications of the academic and non-academic staff are appropriate for the purposes of the higher education institution;*

*1.4.4. Conditions are created for the academic staff to improve the knowledge and skills required for teaching and research activities;*

*1.4.5. Conditions are created for non-academic staff to develop competencies.*

#### *Staff recruitment, management and performance assessment*

46. The arrangements for staff recruitment, management and evaluation are laid down in a number of internal regulations published on the AC website (Statutes; Internal Rules of Procedure, Rules for the Selection and Performance Evaluation; Procedure for Certification of Lecturers and Organisation of Competitions for Positions; Staff Management Procedure; Remuneration Procedure; Equal Opportunities Policy; Code of Academic Ethics). The procedures relating to staff selection, performance appraisal and staff management were adopted to address the relevant 2011 institutional review recommendation.

47. The Rules for the Selection and Performance Evaluation clearly state that staff recruitment is based on the principles of professionalism, transparency, publicity, honesty, equal opportunities and competences. In case candidates are of equal merit in relation to the position, AC gives preference to its staff to increase their motivation and provide career development opportunities, and to its graduates. This is a reasonable arrangement, provided that transparency is ensured in the recruitment process.

48. Academic staff are recruited either through an open competition to work on a five-year contract or a contract for an indefinite time if a candidate has won the competition for the second time, or without a public competition in the case of a contract for a maximum period of two years. The open competition procedure is transparent, laying down detailed arrangements for the publication of a job vacancy; the composition of a selection committee, including representatives of AC staff, academic staff from other higher education institutions, and students and social partners (and an international expert in the case of a competition for a professor position); and the rules of procedure for the committee. The procedure for direct recruitment, without a competition, complies with the provision of the Law on Research and Higher Education. It could, however, ensure greater transparency by laying down more detailed arrangements for the recruitment process in such cases, in particular, because, as the AC Management Team explained to the Panel, AC usually first hires teachers without a competition and holds a competition when the contract expires.

49. It is clear from the internal regulations and the Panel's meeting with the AC administrative staff that they are recruited or selected from among internal candidates in a process where a committee evaluates the candidate's qualifications, skills and experience against the job requirements. The procedures should, however, describe in some detail the rules for internal and external recruitment. As the Management Team and administrative staff explained to the Panel, a number of staff have more than one position in the College as AC gives preference to internal recruitment. This has some evident advantages in terms of efficient use of resources for AC and career development for staff. As noted earlier, though, the College also loses out in this way on new perspectives and ideas that would encourage change in mindsets and institutional practices. The Panel also notes that the AC Quality Assurance Department is not currently staffed (see the Quality Assurance section).

50. The performance of academic staff is assessed every five years in a formal certification process conducted by a commission, which covers teaching, research and staff development activities. During the five-year period, however, performance appraisal is a largely informal and undocumented process; oral feedback is provided twice a year and annually by the Head of the Department, based on end-of-semester student surveys and the teacher's annual report covering all of their activities.

51. The AC regulations clearly define the expectations for staff in terms of their teaching load (further specified in annual teaching plans) and the percentage of the working time to be devoted to research (20% for lecturers and 33% for associate professors). Although this was not mentioned by the stakeholders concerned in the Panel's interviews, research targets are clearly defined for higher positions (professor and association professor) in terms of the type and number of research outputs and their quality (if measured by publications in peer-reviewed journals). However, while most of the AC teachers (65 of 80) hold the position of lecturer, the expectations relating to research for this category of staff are not defined so as to encourage their involvement in research and high quality of outputs, and can hardly be used in performance appraisal. During their contractual period, in addition to performing teaching duties, they should either produce one paper published in a peer-reviewed journal or in a journal promoting science, or present at least one paper at a scientific conference, or carry out specific tasks related to teaching (e.g. development of a new programme or textbook), or participate in

project and research development. As the Panel learned from teachers, financial incentives for research conducted are not yet sufficiently high to substantially increase participation.

52. Deans have meetings with Faculty Boards, and with the Director every three months, to report on their activities. However, no formal mechanisms are in place for performance appraisal of the Director and Deputy Directors, Deans and Heads of Departments and administrative staff. Their performance is assessed only indirectly as part of a review of the annual activity report of the unit or the College.

#### *Number and qualifications of staff*

53. In the academic year 2020/2021, AC employed 80 academic staff; the number of staff has remained fairly stable in the last few years (75 or 78 between 2016/2018 and 2019/2020, except a much smaller number in 2017/2018). Only 5 (6%) of the staff members were employed on a full-time basis and 75 (94%) on a half- or less than half-time basis, including 22 (28%) on a 0.5 to 1 FTE (full-time equivalent) basis and 53 (66%) on a less than 0.5 FTE basis. The proportion of full-time staff varied between 2016/2017 and 2020/2021, but declined steadily in the last two years (9% in 2016/2017; 23% in 2017/2018; 12% in 2018/2019; and 8% in 2019/2020). The very small proportion of full-time staff may be, at least to some extent, explained by the declining numbers of students, and hence the reduced course-load of teachers, and the large proportion of teachers with practical experience (see below), many of whom are working practitioners at the same time. However, it undermines considerably the capacity of the College to conduct applied research, which is reflected in its research production (see Studies and research section).

54. The student/teacher ratio (headcount) is 8 to 1 on average, varying from 10 to 1 in the fields of Nursing, Midwifery and Rehabilitation to at least 5 to 1 in Food Technology. Considering the number of staff in FTE, the student/teacher ratios range from 19 or 20 in the areas of Engineering, Technical, Informatics and Health Sciences to 26 in Business and Public Administration. AC relies predominantly on the headcount ratios and not the FTE ratios, which would provide more adequate and appropriate information.

55. In the academic year 2020/2021, the academic staff included 9 (11%) holding a scientific (doctoral or post-doctoral) degree (as compared to 15% aimed at in the SDP of the College), 68 (85%) with a Master's or equivalent degree, and 3 (4%) with a Bachelor's degree (assistants). The proportion of academic staff with a scientific degree varied only slightly (11% to 13%) in the last five years. The proportion of staff with a scientific degree complies with the national requirements, but they work on a part-time basis, which further restricts the research capacity of AC. Each year, lecturers from the Lithuanian universities (University of Health Sciences, Kaunas University of Technology, Vytautas Magnus University) and foreign institutions teach classes at the College. As the Management Team explained to the Panel, the College is seeking to hire graduates who are interested to study for a PhD and provides support to them to do so. It also expects to attract more staff with a scientific degree in the two or three coming years as the teaching load of professors working at universities is being reduced due to the declining student enrolments, reflecting the demographic decline. Discussions are ongoing with the Kaunas University of Technology.

56. In the academic year 2020/2021, 80% of academic staff had at least 3 years of practical experience and 80% had at least 3 years of teaching experience in the field of a given course. The large proportion of staff with practical experience (compared to at least 50% required by law) reflects a strong focus of AC on practical training, which is appreciated by students. However, the balance in the staffing is tilted too much towards staff with practical experience, as compared to teachers holding a scientific degree, to develop the research potential of the College.

57. AC had 34 administrative and support staff in the academic year 2020/2021, including 22 (65%), employed on a full-time basis, 10 (29%) on 0.5 to 1, and 2 (6%) on a less than 0.5 basis. All staff have at least a Bachelor degree, and 76% hold a Master's or equivalent degree. In the Panel's view, the administrative staff team is adequate, in terms of the number of staff and their qualifications, to efficiently support the College in the core areas of its activity.

### *Professional development*

58. To implement the related 2011 institutional review recommendation, AC introduced competence development plans for academic staff. They are prepared at the unit level and an institutional plan is approved by the Director on an annual basis and reviewed twice a year. As the Panel learned from the representatives of the Department of Human Resources and Document Management, needs are identified on the basis of the functions performed and the courses taught by a teacher. This approach does not maximise benefit for the staff or the College and is not necessarily cost-effective, as the plans are not linked to findings from staff performance appraisal and the impact of staff development activities in this context is not assessed. Plans could also be clearly linked to the strategic objectives when the SDP is revised.

59. Academic staff are supported to study for a Master's degree (for teaching assistants) or a PhD, participate in in-house training and external courses (e.g. pedagogy, psychology, teaching methodology, ICT), internships, various activities as part of international mobility, and in seminars, conferences and other of knowledge-sharing events organised by AC and other institutions. According to the 2020 Annual Report, in the last two years, 90% of staff participated in professional development activities; an equally ambitious target was set in the SDP for 2021, but the COVID-19 pandemic period limited the opportunities available to online activities. As the Panel learned from the teachers, the arrangement that they pay only half of the fee charged motivates them to take courses offered by the AC Teacher Qualification Improvement Division and Applied Research and Non-Formal/Formal Education Centre. Overall, teachers are satisfied with the development opportunities offered, but the Panel believes that AC could provide greater support more closely aligned with the strategic objectives, for example, in foreign language learning (see the related comments on internationalisation in the Studies and research section).

60. Annual plans cover administrative staff who can participate in internal and external training, conferences and seminars, and in other competence development activities during a mobility period. Although this was not raised as an issue by the staff interviewed, the Panel believes that AC could give more consideration to professional development of this category of staff, in particular, because some of them are expected to have a quite wide range of skills

when working in different units of the College. When put in place, performance appraisal of each staff member would allow AC to adequately assess their training needs.

#### *1.5. Efficiency of financial and learning resource management:*

*1.5.1. Financial resources are planned, allocated and used rationally;*

*1.5.2. Various financial resources for the implementation of higher education activities are attracted;*

*1.5.3. Learning resources for provision of studies and research (art) activities are planned and used rationally;*

*1.5.4. Learning resources for conducting studies and research (art) activities are appropriate, sufficient and available.*

#### *Financial resources*

61. A draft budget and an annual financial report prepared by the Director are approved by the Council. As part of the budget setting process, expected income and expenditure are estimated in the middle of the year, based on the completed, ongoing and planned activities, and estimates are approved at the beginning of the financial year. As the Management Team and the Council explained to the Panel, financial resources are planned and allocated among the units based on the expected income, the strategic goals, the review of progress in the implementation of the SDP, new developments (e.g. a new study programme to be established, with teachers to be hired and equipment purchased) and related needs identified by the units. In the Panel's view, the budget planning is not clearly linked to the strategic objectives. The strategic objectives are too broad to provide an appropriate reference framework for an assessment of needs and sound goal-based financial planning.

62. The income sources for the College include state budget subsidies, fees for services (mainly tuition and course fees), targeted funds (project grants, etc.) and support funds (various subsidies, donations, etc.). Its total budget ranged from 1.99 mln euro in 2018 to 1.67 mln euro in 2019 and 1.70 mln euro in 2020; it is expected to increase to 2.7 mln euro in 2021, with a large amount earmarked for infrastructure investment. While its expenditure (1.90 mln euro) exceeded the income (1.67 mln euro) in 2019, AC had a slight budget surplus in 2018 and 2020. The deficit in 2019 indicates a flaw in the planning process, with much higher expenditure than in other years, in particular, on technical equipment as one-off investment. Aside from that, there is evidence that AC seeks to increase cost-efficiency. For example, the number of staff has been reduced and some services (cleaning, IT) outsourced to reduce expenses; with changes in the structure of the College and the redistribution of responsibilities, funds have been released for salaries.

63. AC has been successful, in particular as a public institution. in diversifying its income streams. State-budget subsidies accounted for around 60% of its income in the last three years, reflecting the number of students enrolled (49% in 2018; 66% in 2019 and 62% in 2020); their share is expected to decline to 45% in 2021. Fees for services represented 23% to 25% of the income between 2018 and 2020; their share is expected to decline to 17% in 2021. The share of targeted and support funds (EU, national and local government grants for academic cooperation, teaching and applied research activities) dropped significantly from

26% in 2018 to 12% in 2019 and 2020, but is expected to increase to 38% in 2021. Funding from sources other than the State budget has allowed AC to upgrade its teaching, learning and research facilities (e.g. equipment for the programme in General Nursing, the Faculty of Information Technologies and Management and the Alytus STEAM Open Access Centre). It is also used to cover regular expenses where necessary (e.g. taxes) or expenses related to the teaching process (e.g. utilities, materials and supplies) when State budget subsidies are not sufficient.

### *Learning resources*

64. As the Panel learned during the site visit, to plan and allocate learning resources, the Departments of Digital Technologies, Procurement and Maintenance and Supply and the Information and Self-Study Centre collect proposals from the units based on the SDP. In case there are conflicting demands, decisions are taken by the Directorate. For the same reasons as in the budget setting process, there are no clear priorities to link resource planning and allocation to the strategic objectives of the College.

65. AC regularly allocates funding for the upgrading of IT facilities, technical equipment and the renovation of buildings and premises, and for library, teaching and learning resources, with amounts varying between 2016 and 2020 (e.g. €132,000 for IT and technical equipment and €111,200 in 2016, and €10,200 and €69,900, respectively, in 2020), depending on the needs and funding available. A significant increase in the funding for IT and technical equipment (over €800,000) is expected in 2021.

66. According to the SER, the total area per student increased from 13.48 square metres in 2016 to 15.63 square metres in 2020. Based on the video materials provided by AC, the Faculties and Departments have fully equipped specialist laboratories for practical training and applied research, and classrooms equipped with IT equipment, with some workplaces adapted to the needs of students with disabilities. Some specialist labs (e.g. a biomedicine training lab) and equipment are used not only by AC students, but also by professionals and secondary school students involved in the activities of the Junior IT Specialists Academy and the STEAM Open Access Centre. The Information and Self-Study Centre has a fully automated library system and offers nearly 22,000 printed and electronic publications and access to national and international electronic libraries and databases. For the students and graduates whom the Panel met, the equipment for practical training is a big asset of the College. For some of the teachers interviewed, more equipment would be needed to develop applied research.

67. **In summary**, the main transversal issues are the limited capacity of AC for analysis and subsequent evidence-based strategic planning and management, and its excessive reliance on informal processes and ad-hoc activities. AC has yet to find the right balance between its shortcut-like ways of doing business, which give it the advantage of agility, and more formal and systematic approaches.

The strategic plan is not underpinned by an adequate evidence-based context analysis, does not set sufficiently specific and measurable objectives and priorities, and includes a narrow range of mostly quantitative indicators. Despite some improvements made, progress

monitoring does not yet involve a sufficiently systematic, thorough and critical analysis of the data collected to improve the performance of the College in the core areas of its activity.

The governance structure and division of management powers and responsibilities are clearly set out in the internal documents. However, the current composition of the Council does not comply with the legal requirements (based on the evidence collected during the site visit), the governing bodies fail to perform effectively some of their strategic management functions, and the mechanisms in place are not adequate to evaluate their effectiveness. Centralised decision-making does not undermine efficiency in day-to-day decision-making as it is largely based on informal processes. Process management is regularly reviewed; however, its effectiveness is limited by the flaws in the strategic plan and the lack of systematic collection and analysis of a sufficiently wide range of data to evaluate performance and inform decision-making.

Overall, the staff recruitment procedures are sufficiently transparent and professional development opportunities quite wide and diverse, even if this is slightly less evident for administrative staff. However, there are no formal performance appraisal mechanisms for some categories of staff; where they are in place for other staff, appraisal results are not linked to professional development activities. The research capacity of AC is severely undermined by the very small proportion of full-time academic staff, and the absence of a core team of full-time staff holding a scientific degree; staff do not have clearly defined research targets.

With diversified income streams, AC has sufficient financial resources to conduct its planned activities and regularly expand its learning resources, and adequate facilities and resources for teaching, learning and research activities. However, resource planning and allocation is not clearly linked to the strategic objectives, which reflects the flaws in strategic planning and management.

Various issues identified in this area affect the performance of AC in the other three areas.

68. **Judgment:** the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are fundamental drawbacks, and it is given 1 point.

69. **Recommendations for the area:**

- AC should, as a matter of priority, ensure that all relevant stakeholders are represented on its Council. It should also ensure better integration of students and encourage their more active participation in governance and, in particular, in decision-making processes.
- AC should revise its mission statement to make it more specific and highlight unique features of the College and thus to guide the strategic management of AC.
- AC should develop a coherent framework for strategic planning, and review and revise its Strategic Development Plan to include a suitable context analysis, covering both the external and internal environments, and set SMART objectives, appropriate indicators and aligned action plans, supported by an adequate monitoring and reporting system.
- AC should revise the indicators in the Strategic Development Plan that refer to the number of students and graduates so that they are correlated with the labour market

analysis and the projected demand for professionals in specific sectors and fields identified in collaboration with external stakeholders.

- AC should ensure the accountability of its governing bodies for the performance of their functions and develop a mechanism for regular review and evaluation of the effectiveness of its governing bodies.
- AC should enhance its analytical capacities to support evidence-based decision-making. AC should develop a systematic approach to data collection and analysis, aggregation and disaggregation and usage and cross-referencing to further support its analytical capacities. Findings from data analysis should lead to clearly formulated recommendations for follow-up action, and information on findings, recommendations and follow-up actions taken should be easily available to internal and external stakeholders.
- AC should clearly define and communicate expectations for academic staff in terms of research, support to administration and community service, including research targets in terms of the number, type and quality levels of publications expected.
- AC should formalise its performance appraisal system for administrative staff, academic staff and management, and integrate the expectations set for academic staff into the performance appraisal. It should also link its performance appraisal system to its professional development activities and systematically evaluate the impact of professional development support.
- AC should design a staff development strategy that ensures an adequate balance between practical experience and research potential. Priority should be given to increasing the number of academic staff employed on a full-time basis.
- Budget planning and funding allocations for the units should be closely related to clear and specific strategic goals and priorities and based on a related analysis of development needs of each unit.

#### 70. **Good practice examples:**

- AC is commended for its consistent and successful efforts to diversify its income streams.

### 3.2. Quality assurance

*Quality assurance* area is analysed in accordance to the following indicators and criteria, set up in the Methodology.

#### *2.1. Implementation and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system:*

*2.1.1. The higher education institution has approved and made publicly available internal quality assurance documents that are consistent with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area;*

*2.1.2. Internal quality assurance measures of planning, implementation and improvement are appropriate, applied periodically and ensure the involvement of the whole institution and stakeholders;*

- 2.1.3. Processes for planning, implementation, monitoring, periodic evaluation and development of activities are specified;*
- 2.1.4. Students and academic and non-academic staff of the institution receive effective support;*
- 2.1.5. Provisions and procedures for academic integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination, appeal and ethics are specified and applied;*
- 2. 2.1.6. The results of the external review are used to improve the performance of the higher education institution.*

*Design and operation of the internal quality assurance system*

71. AC has in place a certified ISO 9001: 2015 internal quality management system. The Quality Policy and the Quality Manual are published on the AC website, together with findings from surveys conducted by the College and external institutional and programme review reports.

72. The 2011 review panel recommended that AC conduct a self-assessment of its compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) before introducing an internationally accredited quality assurance system. In the Panel's view, the system in place is not yet fully compliant with the ESG, and the discussions with the responsible internal stakeholders indicate that there is a need to ensure a better understanding and common interpretation of the ESG. In both its design and implementation, the system focuses on compliance with the procedures rather than quality enhancement. When it is reviewed against the ESG, the Panel suggests that AC take measures encouraging self-evaluation, reflection and analysis and fostering a shift in the mindsets towards quality enhancement and a quality culture. Most of the relevant ESG are either fully or largely integrated into the quality assurance processes and procedures (see the related recommendation on staff performance appraisal (ESG 1.5) in the Management section). As regards ESG 1.3 (Student- centred learning, teaching and assessment), the SER refers only to a range of flexible study options available, attending to diverse needs of students. Some elements highlighted in this ESG (e.g. student involvement in programme development and review; variety of teaching and learning methods, including active learning methods, complaints and appeals procedures) are addressed through the quality assurance procedures. However, the methodology, as described in the documents, pays little attention to student-centred curriculum and the link between student-centred learning and teaching and a student-centred approach in assessment. As explained in the Management and Studies and Research sections, there is also ample room for improvement in data collection and analysis for the effective management of study programmes and other activities (ESG 1.7, Information Management). (See the related comments in the Management section.)

73. According to the Quality Manual, annual planning of quality assurance measures is based on the SDP, with risks, and implementation and improvement measures to be identified. As outlined in the Management section, the SDP does not provide an appropriate framework for annual planning. The quality assurance system is implemented through 13 processes that are designed to jointly cover all aspects of the operation of AC (transversal processes such as activity planning and analysis, management of non-conformities and corrective actions; and processes relating to the core areas such as management of study programmes and of applied

research). According to the Manual, the effectiveness of the system is monitored through audits and reviewed annually by the hosts of the processes, based on previous review decisions and an analysis of external and internal factors, data collected (SDP indicators, stakeholder feedback), available resources, risk-mitigating actions and opportunities for improvement identified. A review identifies areas for improvement and corrective actions to be taken.

74. In its meetings with the internal stakeholders, the Panel received little evidence about the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system. Adjustments in the study programme management, including extended opportunities for students to provide feedback (see below), are the main improvements made in the system itself. Beyond that, annual reviews have led to structural changes in AC (see Management); revised teacher schedules, and course descriptions revised in two programmes. The limited range of opportunities for improvement identified can be explained by the focus of the system on compliance with procedures rather than quality enhancement, and the lack of systematic collection, analysis and cross-referencing of a sufficiently wide range of data to support decision-making (see Management and Studies and Research), the limited range of tools for data collection and a gap in the quality loop. The number of audits dropped from 11 in 2016 to 2 in 2020. To collect feedback, AC relies mainly on reports and surveys (regular surveys among newly enrolled, final-year and Erasmus+ students, and end-of-semester student course evaluation surveys introduced to address the 2011 review recommendation; graduate surveys; and ad-hoc surveys such as the recent one on “the psychological atmosphere” among the academic community members). Except for a student survey on support, there is no formal mechanism for regular collection of feedback on institutional management matters (as opposed to teaching and learning matters, which the surveys mentioned above, and referred to in the AC response to the review report, focus on) from students and staff. Interviews and roundtables with social partners are held on an ad-hoc basis and are not based on a structured approach. For various largely informal institutional management processes (see Management), the quality loop has yet to be closed as they do not lead to documented internal recommendations or proposals for improvement and follow-up action. Finally, the accountability of the units or individuals responsible for quality assurance would need to be enhanced by the publication of follow-up action taken, in addition to survey results currently available on the AC website.

75. The responsibility for each of the quality management processes is clearly assigned in the Quality Manual to the top- or-middle-management staff or another individual or unit, and the Quality Assurance Department has a coordinating and supporting role in the system. However, at the time of the Panel’s visit, the arrangements had yet to be clarified, as there was a vacancy in the Quality Assurance Department and a quality committee, which is expected to involve a wider range of stakeholders, was not functioning yet. When staffed or functioning, the Department or the committee, as well as the Applied Research and Non-Formal and Formal Education Centre, could also clarify with the Academic Council what inputs it expects from them to perform effectively its task related to oversight of the quality assurance system and evaluation of the quality and results of applied research (see the related comments in the Management section).

76. The owners of the quality assurance processes include the Director, Deputy Director, Head of, or a staff of, an administrative unit. In the Panel's view, the involvement of teachers and students in the annual review of the system could provide useful insights to increase its effectiveness (see the related comment about feedback on institutional matters below). The ESG recommend that institutions should involve stakeholders in both the development and the review of the quality assurance system. The students and teachers whom the Panel met explained that they were involved in quality assurance via their representatives on Study Programme Committees, and through feedback provided in surveys (for students), an online feedback tool, and in an informal way. In the students' view, AC sometimes acts upon their feedback, as evidenced by changes such as the dismissal of a teacher in response to survey findings; recently introduced after-class informal discussion on what went well or wrong; and one hour now officially allocated to discuss examination results. This is an improvement as, based on the information provided by SKVC, complaints filed earlier indicated that some teachers were not fully qualified to run their courses. Social partners are represented on Study Programme Committees; as noted above, a wider range of formal feedback mechanisms for them would need to be introduced.

77. The quality assurance system is designed to cover all core areas of activity of the College, including education (study programmes, and non-formal education), applied research and consulting services, and administration and management. However, the extent of quality assurance activities and implementation varies, in fact, between the areas.

78. The study programme management process covers all stages – from planning a new programme, based on a labour market analysis, when the idea to establish it is put forward by an internal or external stakeholder, to regular review of an ongoing programme twice a year by the Study Programme Committee, based on student course evaluation surveys, student reports on internships, graduate career data, and feedback collected from social partners. Each Committee prepares programme improvement plans and progress reports. However, as the Panel explained in the Management and Studies and research sections, there is room for improvement in the analysis of data on the performance of programmes, and AC does not yet have in place a forward-looking mechanism for systematic medium- and long-term labour-market demand assessment to plan its study programmes. AC has recently introduced trainee surveys to evaluate its non-formal education courses and events; as noted in the section on the Impact on national and regional development, it does not have yet a mechanism for forward planning of its lifelong learning activities based on a labour market needs assessment.

79. The students and teachers whom the Panel met explained that they provide feedback on study programmes via their representatives on the various bodies at the institutional and unit levels, course evaluation surveys (for students) and, on an informal basis, outside these bodies. Nevertheless, the Panel gathers from the interviews that contributions from students are rather limited. AC could devise ways to encourage students to become more extensively involved in the planning and development of contents and delivery of education.

80. In their meetings with the Panel, the internal stakeholders responsible for, or involved in, research, mentioned various aspects that are taken into account in the evaluation of applied research activities (e.g. quantitative data in the Annual Report such as the level of funding and

number of projects; proportion of staff time to be devoted to research; number of students involved research; student feedback; external reviews). These do not make up a coherent approach to evaluation at the levels of the institution and individual staff members, and focus mainly on quantitative aspects. The Panel found no evidence of a specific formal mechanism for quality evaluation of consulting services.

81. The mechanisms for quality assurance of management and administration, including the effectiveness of the governing bodies (see Management) and administrative units, need to become more formalised. Currently, they are based on a review of an annual report, which focuses on what was done rather than the outcome of activities, with no formal internal recommendations for follow-up action and their monitoring.

82. In their interview with the Panel, the Management Team expressed the view that the internal quality assurance system is excessively bureaucratic, puts a heavy strain on the resources and limits creativity. Since the Panel recommends a review of the entire system in terms of its effectiveness and formalisation of some mechanisms, this gives AC an opportunity to identify processes and procedures that are burdensome but have no added value. The 2019 decision of AC not to apply for ISO 9001: 2015 re-certification allows more flexibility in the review of the system. Yet, the Panel believes that AC needs to change its approach to quality assurance as a core element of the College's activities rather than an additional layer of activities that need to be conducted due to external requirements. Such a view would support the development of an institutional quality culture.

#### *Support for students and staff*

83. AC offers an extensive range of support to students, as confirmed by the students whom the Panel met. A recent satisfaction survey on support shows that the only types of support currently missing are student group mentors and scholarships for internships. During the Introduction Week, newly enrolled students meet with the Student Association and receive information related to studies and mobility. As part of academic support, a "curator" appointed for each group provides information on any issues, and course teachers have individual or group tutorials ("consultations"). The newly enrolled students with low marks in the secondary school (a large proportion of the entrants each year) get additional tutorials. The rates of student dropout due to academic failure were reduced, even in the programmes where they had initially been high (e.g. 46% in 2016/2017 and 6% in 2019/2020 in the Management programme). Psychological support, in the form of individual and group sessions, has been offered since 2019. The Marketing Centre provides assistance in internship placement and career guidance. Administrative support is provided by the Study Centre. Financial support includes both AC maintenance and incentive-type grants, including special grants for students with a disability, in addition to those awarded by the government bodies and various organisations. The College also organises various integration, sport and leisure activities and offers accommodation in the AC hostel. Individual study plans, and adapted assessment methods and facilities, in particular in the Faculty of Information and Management, are available to students with a disability.

84. AC visits schools and organises open day events to attract prospective students. Since various types of support make it an attractive place for students, AC could consider reaching

out more actively to prospective students from various disadvantaged backgrounds. AC states in its response to the review report that the Law on Legal Protection of Personal Data of the Republic of Lithuania does not allow it to obtain data about, and contact, prospective students from socially disadvantaged families. Nevertheless, the Panel believes that the College could find suitable communication channels to target disadvantaged groups rather than individual prospective students and highlight its openness to disadvantaged applicants in its promotion campaigns.

85. Both academic and administrative staff are acquainted with the internal regulations and activities of the College, receive advice from the head of the unit and are provided with training or coaching where necessary. The staff whom the Panel met are fully satisfied with the support they received during the induction period. AC could consider providing some incentive-like financial support for teachers studying for a PhD to attract a larger number of full-time staff and increase its research potential.

#### *Ethics and appeals procedure*

86. Ethical issues are addressed in the AC Code of Academic Ethics signed by members of the academic community, the Equal Opportunities Policy, and the Study Regulations that lay down penalties for a breach of the Code. The Code clearly sets out the principles of academic integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination. Anti-plagiarism system software is used for student coursework and final theses. Breaches of ethical rules are handled by the Commission of Academic Ethics, composed of teachers, other staff and students. The requirement to sign the Code, possible sanctions and the involvement of all internal stakeholder groups in the Commission would seem to ensure that the Code is adhered to in practice or cases of breach are identified and handled impartially. However, the 2020 audit of the Central Internal Audit Service and audits of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures of the Republic of Lithuania revealed several cases of breach of ethics, related, among other things, to undeclared private interest. The Panel understands from the documents received that the issues have recently been addressed by AC. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the current arrangements for compliance with ethical standards should be assessed as part of the recommended review of the quality assurance system.

87. The appeals and complaints procedures are laid down in the Study Regulations and the Procedure for Appeals Submission and Consideration. Appeals and complaints are considered by a commission set up on an ad-hoc basis, and other disputable issues in teaching and research by the Commission for Disputes, both involving students. One request from a student for reconsideration of an exam incident has been filed and rejected until now; one appeal case has been considered and rejected as the decision taken was considered objective; no complaint has been lodged. The students whom the Panel met are informed about the procedures, which are published on AC website, but could not comment on their efficiency or impartiality as they have not been involved in these cases. The number of the cases is too insignificant for the Panel to draw reliable conclusions.

#### *Follow-up on findings from external reviews*

88. The SER submitted under this external review followed the structure set by SKVC but was of low quality. While some details and repetitions were redundant, the SER contained little substantive or sufficiently clear information, in particular, on the management and quality assurance processes. It did not provide any self-analysis or reflection in relation to the evaluation criteria that would clearly identify strengths and areas for improvement identified by AC in its self-evaluation process.

89. The extent to which AC has addressed the 2011 institutional review recommendations varies depending on the issue identified. They have been fully implemented, in particular, where they referred to the adoption of procedures. For example, the College has adopted and published the Code of Academic Ethics, Study Regulations, a Quality Handbook for Students, and procedures for student internships and assessment (papers, exams, final theses). Students are currently represented on the governing bodies and Faculty Boards, Study Programme Committees, the Academic Ethics Commission and the Appeal Commission. The new procedures and arrangements have made the regular operations of the College more transparent and contributed to its accountability. However, the recommendations related to strategic planning and management (e.g. clear priorities to be defined in strategic plans; strategies for staff development, applied research development and regional engagement) have been left unaddressed. As noted earlier, the limited capacity for strategic planning and management is the main horizontal issue that affects compliance of the College with the evaluation criteria in the present institutional review.

90. **In summary**, the internal quality assurance system is not yet fully compliant with the ESG in its overall focus on compliance with procedures rather than quality enhancement and in relation to some of the European standards. The responsibilities are clearly assigned to the owners of the quality assurance processes and the internal and external stakeholders are to some extent involved in their implementation, but due to a vacancy, the Quality Assurance Department does not perform its functions. There is little evidence of sound planning of quality assurance measures and of the effectiveness of the internal quality system, which reflects, in particular, the issues in strategic planning and in the collection and analysis of data, identified in the Management area. In response to the previous review recommendations, AC has adopted various institutional management procedures that have enhanced the transparency of its operations, but has not developed yet a sound framework for strategic planning and management.

AC provides extensive support to students and adequate support to staff during their induction period. Considering its currently limited research potential, the College could provide some financial support to staff to encourage them to study for a doctoral degree.

AC has policies and procedures in place to ensure that its staff and students adhere to the principles of ethics, but an external audit demonstrates that the effectiveness of the procedures should be evaluated as part of the review of the internal quality assurance system. The appeals and complaints procedures appear to be transparent, but the very small number of appeals and complaints filed does not allow the Panel to assess their efficiency or impartiality.

91. **Judgment:** the area - the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are drawbacks that must be addressed, and is given 2 points.

## 92. Recommendations for the area:

- AC should review and revise its quality assurance system to ensure its full compliance with Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. In doing so, it should ensure, in particular, that student-centred learning, teaching and assessment are properly understood and adequately addressed in the quality assurance system.
- AC should develop and implement a mechanism that regularly assesses its quality assurance system in terms of its robustness and effectiveness with a view to establishing a system that focuses on quality enhancement. The review should also address the effectiveness of the procedures designed to ensure compliance with ethical standards.
- AC should develop a mechanism for students and staff to regularly provide feedback on institutional matters.
- AC should publish information on follow-up action taken in response to the feedback collected.
- AC should, as a matter of priority, ensure that the QA Department is adequately staffed.
- AC should extend its quality assurance system so that it fully covers all aspects of the operations of the College, including administration, governance, leadership, research and community service.
- AC should formalise the review of administrative units as part of its quality assurance system.
- AC should ensure systematic follow-up from quality assurance activities, including recommendations from external reviews.

### 3.3. Studies and research (art)

*Studies and research (art)* area is analysed in accordance to the following indicators and criteria, set up in the Methodology.

*3.1. The level of research (art), compatibility of studies and research (art) and its compliance with the strategic aims of activities:*

*3.1.1. The study and research (art) activities carried out and their results are consistent with the mission and strategic aims of the higher education institution;*

*3.1.2. The level of research (art) activities is sufficient for the ongoing studies of the higher education institution;*

*3.1.3. Studies are based on research (art);*

*3.1.4. Consistent recognition of foreign qualifications, partial studies and prior non-formal and informal learning is performed.*

93. In its Strategic Development Plan, AC aims to provide study programmes responding to the needs of the regional labour market and society. In its meetings with the internal and external stakeholders, the Panel found plenty of evidence that AC is eager to respond to the needs of social partners by establishing new programmes, and that graduates in some of its fields of study are very much in demand on the regional labour market. However, in

developing new programmes, AC takes a reactive rather than pro-active approach, responding to suggestions put forward on an ad-hoc basis mainly by social partners. It currently has no mechanism in place for systematic assessment and analysis of regional labour market needs in the medium and long term.

94. AC offers 13 programmes (see: Introduction). In 2019/2020, four programmes (Computer Network Administration; Virtual Technologies; Finance; International Business), where the student enrolment decline had been most drastic, were abolished, and four new ones (Information Systems; Multimedia and Visual Communication; Physiotherapy; and Business Management) were established. The number of students enrolled on all of the programmes offered before 2019/2020, except in General Practice Nursing, decreased steadily between 2016/2017 and 2020/2021. While the enrolments on the new Information Systems programme were very low (7 in 2018/2019 and 6 in 2020/2021), the other new programmes attracted increasing numbers of students in the last two years (Multimedia and Visual Communication: 5 in 2019/2020 and 16 in 2020/2021; Physiotherapy: 26 and 38 respectively; Business Management: 17 and 39 respectively). In explaining to the Panel the reasons behind the declining enrolments, AC tended to focus on external factors such as the demographic decline and emigration. The Panel did not find evidence that this is based on a systematic and thorough analysis of the available performance data for individual programmes and across programmes to identify the root causes of the student enrolment and retention problems (see the related comments on data collection and analysis in the Management section, and in the Quality Assurance section).

95. Other available data also indicate that there is room for improvement in the study programmes in terms of their quality, highlighted in the mission statement, and / or their relevance to regional labour market needs, highlighted in the strategic objectives. In terms of their quality, the programmes scored between 14 and 19 of 24 points (with scores ranging between 14 and 16 for most of the programmes) in the last SKVC external evaluations. The total dropout rates (a percentage of the total student population in a given academic year) remained high (19% in 2016/2017, 20% in 2017/2018, 17% in 2018/2019, 27% in 2019/2020 and 20% in 2020/2021). Among the first-year students who dropped out, 14% to 60%, depending on the field of study, did so “by choice”; the underlying reasons would need to be more carefully analysed. Based on the data in the AC 2020 Annual Activity Report, the graduate employment rates in January 2021 varied from 71% to 100%, depending on the field of study. However, the proportion of AC graduates employed in positions requiring a higher education qualification was much smaller, varying from 46% in 2016 to 56% in 2020 for the total graduate cohorts (SER), and between 25% and 71%, depending on the field of study, between 2017 and 2020 (based on the average figures) (Ministry of Social Security and Labour). As the study programmes evidently vary in terms of their performance measured by such data, a comparative programme review would provide valuable insights for improvement. (See also the related comments in the Quality Assurance section.)

96. Flexible programme provision is an evident asset of the College in catering to the needs of diverse student groups. The programmes are delivered in both full-time and part-time modes of study (for statistical data, see the Introduction). To extend the range of study options available to students, the College also offers the possibility of following an individual study

plan. As the Panel learned from the students, this is particularly appreciated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

97. In line with the AC mission to provide programmes based on professional practice, the programmes have a strong practical focus. This is ensured through the integration of real-life problems into curricular contents, the teaching and learning methods (case studies, laboratory classes, project work), student involvement in applied research projects carried out jointly with teachers, internships and final thesis projects addressing real-life problems. An overall fairly large proportion of the student final thesis projects is commissioned by companies, even though this varies depending on the area (e.g. 80% in Information Engineering fields; 43% in Civil Engineering; 40% in Automobile Transport Engineering and Business and Public Administration; 30% in Nursing and Obstetrics). The practical orientation of the programmes was highlighted as a major strength of the College by the students whom the Panel met. They are very satisfied with the balance between theory and practice and appreciate the opportunities to gain practical experience in project-based coursework, internships and applied research projects. The knowledge and skills of students and graduates are highly valued by the employers interviewed by the Panel. Nonetheless, as regards the relevance to job requirements, some of the graduates interviewed mentioned that teaching materials used by AC in some specific courses (e.g. automobile engineering) had been slightly outdated.

98. The mission statement and the strategic objectives make it clear that AC is a teaching-centred institution where applied research should serve primarily the purpose of feeding into study programmes and improving their quality. While this sets a general direction, the College does not have in place a systematic framework for research that would clearly define types of research and applied research activities, objectives and targets for each type, and provide incentives for staff to conduct the planned research. The strategic objective to conduct applied research with a view to improving the quality of programmes is too broad to guide activities in a three-year time span of the SDP. As explained by the Academic Council, research plans are drawn up on an annual basis, following a bottom-up approach, with working groups at the departmental level developing proposals that are approved by the Academic Council. At the same time, the Applied Research and Non-Formal / Formal Education Centre is expected to coordinate research activities and identify research priorities, but it has no clearly defined role in the process of setting priorities or approving proposals. The Panel's interviews with the Academic Council, Deans and Heads indicate that without a coherent framework for research in place, AC is struggling to find the right balance between externally driven commissioned research and research initiated internally in response to the needs identified in study programmes.

99. The SER includes the following types of research outputs or activities: research production (monographs, articles, papers, conference proceedings); consulting services, training courses and seminars; articles and reports on various topics (e.g. teaching, culture) for teacher conferences; reports on various topics (e.g. democratic engagement) for student conferences; articles in the media; 'consultations' for social partners and individuals on various teaching and learning and other topics. The list does not make a clear distinction between the output of research, applied research, consulting and other activities. It includes a number of outputs (e.g. articles on the activities of the College published in the media; training events;

‘consultations’) that could not be considered as applied research, as defined in the national legislation. The actual volume of the research production is rather modest. This is also reflected in the low income of AC from applied research, ranging from €46,000 to €67,000 between 2015 and 2020; this is the third-lowest income amongst the Lithuanian colleges (data provided by SKVC). The AC 2020 Annual Report does not provide evidence that the performance of the College has been improving; only six applied research projects related to study programmes were conducted each year between 2019 and 2020, and the income from research dropped from €30,600 in 2019 to €15,000 in 2020 (as compared to expected €20,000). AC’s research capacity is limited by the very small proportion of academic staff employed on a full-time basis, in addition to the lack of a strategic framework for research (see also the related comments in the Management section).

100. As explained in the SER, elements of research and applied research are integrated into study programmes through the teaching and learning methods that develop students’ analytical, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and through the involvement of students in applied research as part of, for example, their independent coursework and final theses and commissioned research projects. Besides that, however, the research production of the College is too limited to have a significant impact on study programmes. Furthermore, academic staff would need more methodological guidelines at the institutional level for integrating research outcomes into curricula. To support the integration of education and research, AC could put in place arrangements that facilitate and encourage multidisciplinary work both in research via interdepartmental projects and in teaching via student problem-solving project tasks.

101. In its SDP, AC aims to enhance staff competences. To make related activities more targeted, the Panel encourages the College to identify priorities for competence development aligned with more specific objectives for the development of studies and applied research to be defined in the revised SDP. (See also the related recommendations on staff management in the Management section.)

102. AC has in place a clear procedure for the recognition of foreign qualifications. It includes an internal evaluation of the documents (completeness and validity of documents; calculation of the score; language proficiency certificates), followed by a letter of confirmation to SKVC; an external evaluation by SKVC; and admission of a candidate based on a certificate of recognition issued by SKVC. Sources of information for internal evaluation are updated on a continuous basis (international recommendations, national legislation, internal regulations).

103. There are, likewise, sound procedures for the recognition of credits obtained in another Lithuanian or foreign higher education institution, with no additional requirements for students coming from institutions that have an agreement with AC (“coordinated curricular content”) and clear rules, based on the correspondence between the programmes and a fixed percentage (75%) that can be recognised, for other students. However, the Panel could not collect student feedback on the efficiency or consistent application of the procedure, as no international student or local student who had completed a study period abroad attended the relevant site visit session.

104. The procedure for the recognition or validation of non-formal and informal learning has yet to be tested, as AC had not received any application by the time of the Panel's site visit. The procedure is clear, including a counselling session, the assessment of the applicant's Learning Achievements Portfolio, and further assessment using suitable methods in case the Portfolio does not sufficiently demonstrate the applicant's competences. As could be expected, the assessment panel is composed of the Head of the relevant Department, a teacher of the relevant course and a social partner.

## 2.2. *Internationality of studies, research (art):*

*3.2.1. The higher education institution has a strategy for internationalisation of research (art) and study activities (including indicators of internationalisation), means for its implementation, and measurements of the effectiveness of these activities are performed (not applicable to colleges unless provided for in its strategic documents);*

*3.2.2. The higher education institution integrates aspects of internationalisation into the content of studies and research (art) activities.*

105. To implement the 2011 institutional review recommendation to design a business plan for internationalisation, AC developed an action plan and carried out a number of activities (e.g. self-analysis; definition of indicators; participation in promotion activities). However, this was a one-off initiative which has not led to the development of an internationalisation strategy (although the internationalisation objectives, tasks and tools in the current SDP are referred to in the SER as a strategy) or a form of systematic planning of internationalisation activities.

106. The internationalisation objective of AC is defined in the SDP as “successful activities in the international arena”, with “internationalisation of studies” as the related task. This is to be achieved by fostering internationalisation and intercultural competences of the College community; developing international relations into strategic partnerships and projects; developing virtual mobility; and extending the range of programmes for students from outside of the EU and the European Economic Area. Like for other areas of the College's activity, the strategic objectives are too broad to indicate what it aims to achieve and measure progress towards achievement, and they are not supported by a proper internationalisation strategy that would define at least the priority thematic areas, target countries and actions. To design such a strategy, AC would need to analyse the current level of internationalisation (which varies considerably between the different fields of study if measured by the volume of student mobility; see below), and review the resources available, also in terms of foreign language skills of staff, and existing partnerships in terms of their added value for its strategic development.

107. For a small and regional institution, AC has established an extensive international network. It has signed 49 agreements with higher education institutions (HEIs) in 19 countries participating in the Erasmus+ Programme, and 26 bilateral cooperation agreements on academic cooperation and student and staff mobility with HEIs in 9 countries (e.g. Japan, USA). Recently, AC has been involved in 5 projects focusing on various areas: mobility, internationalisation, ICT education and active citizenship. Since it aims to boost “the

internationalisation of studies”, it could consider involvement in joint curriculum development projects.

108. The volume of teacher mobility varies depending on its purpose (e.g. teaching / training assignments; participation in a conference / seminar, expert activities, study visits or projects). Teaching / training assignments undertaken under the Erasmus+ Programme are likely to have the most significant impact on the internationalisation of the study programmes. The number of the outgoing teachers involved in the mobility of this type as a proportion of all AC academic staff varied from 13% in 2016/2017 to 30% in 2017/2018, and from 15% in 2018/2019 to 27% in 2019/2020, and dropped to 1% in 2020/2021 due to the pandemic; the corresponding figures for incoming teachers were 12%, 11%, 19%, 21% and 3%. The proportion of outgoing teachers was fairly large considering that most of the staff work on a part-time basis at the College, and there was an upward trend in the inward mobility before the pandemic.

109. As part of credit mobility under the Erasmus+ Programme, the number of outgoing students as a proportion of the total AC student population varied between 2.8% in 2016/2017, 3.0% in 2017/2018, 3.8% in 2018/2018, 2.2% in 2019/2020, and 0.7% in 2020/2021 due to the pandemic. Incoming students represented 1.1% of the AC student population in 2016/2017 and 2017/2018, 2.2% in 2018/2019, 2.0% in 2019/2020 and 0.3% in 2020/2021. Although AC has yet to achieve a balance between the outward and inward mobility, the proportions are quite satisfactory, since part-time students (one-third of the AC population) rarely undertake a study period abroad. However, mobility levels vary substantially depending on the field, with only seven study programmes involved, and more than a half of the outgoing students and all of the incoming students enrolled on the programmes in the fields of Informatics Engineering and Management.

110. As part of degree mobility, the College hosted a large number of international students (194) between 2016/2017 and 2020/2021, following full degree programmes in 5 fields but, again, mainly in the areas of Management and Informatics Engineering. The gradual decline in the number of international students (from 67 in 2016/2017 (8.5% of the AC student population) in 2016/2017 to 20 (3.2%) in 2019/2020 and 15 (2.4%) in 2020/2021) was due to the national visa policy and the attractiveness of the programmes offered declining for students.

111. While AC has developed five study programmes in English and two are being currently offered, it provides limited support to staff to enhance their language skills (on-campus English language courses, and digital resources available for English learning). Since, as the Panel learned during its visit, some staff may speak other foreign languages, a wider range of opportunities to enhance language skills would help the College accomplish its strategic objectives. The opportunities for local and international students to learn together are limited to a language course. The Panel strongly encourages AC to deliver at least some courses as part of the study programmes in English to mixed groups of local and international students with a view to developing their intercultural competences and achieving significant impact on internationalisation.

112. Progress in the implementation of the internationalisation component of the SDP is evaluated as part of annual management reviews through a set of indicators (number of agreements and international projects; number or proportion of outgoing and incoming students and teachers). They are sufficient to measure the volume of mobility and international engagement, but do not cover some elements highlighted in the SDP (e.g. virtual mobility, programmes for international students). None of them addresses expected qualitative outcomes related to intercultural competences. The indicators focus on the input side, with none allowing AC to measure the impact of its international engagement.

113. Among the main impacts of its international activities, AC highlighted its expanded collaboration and enhanced visibility and reputation; improved competence of teachers used in teaching, non-formal education courses and consulting services; new teaching and training methods and resources introduced; and students' soft skills (foreign language, critical thinking, interpersonal and intercultural and ICT skills) developed. Further to the comments above, a useful impact indicator could address upgraded curricular contents. As teachers are not yet involved in research mobility, AC could explore opportunities offered by the Marie Curie Actions as part of the EU Horizon Programme to develop research competence of staff.

114. **In summary**, the study programmes are characterised by flexibility in provision and practical orientation. The programmes vary in their quality and / or regional labour-market relevance and, thus, in the extent to which they carry forward the AC mission and strategic objectives. There is also little evidence that the data available is systematically analysed to identify the root causes of the declining student enrolments and relatively low graduate employment rates. New programmes are developed in response to needs identified mainly by social partners on an ad-hoc basis rather than based on a systematic analysis of medium- and long-term labour market needs.

AC lacks a systematic framework for the development of research and applied research, its research production is not sufficient to have meaningful impact on the study programmes in line with the mission and strategic objectives, and there is little evidence that the research performance is improving. AC has set up a wide network for its international activities and is quite extensively involved in mobility, but the activities are not yet guided by a proper strategic framework and the extent of involvement in mobility varies considerably between the fields of study.

The main issues in this area are rooted in the limited strategic planning and management capacities and / or effectiveness of the quality assurance system of the College.

115. **Judgment:** the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are drawbacks that must be addressed, and it is given 2 points.

116. **Recommendations for the area:**

- AC should analyse root causes of the steady and significant decline in the numbers of students enrolled on its study programmes with a view to ensuring the sustainability of its current and future programme portfolio.
- AC should shift to a more pro-active and forward-looking approach to programme development based on a systematic analysis of medium- and long-term needs of the regional labour market, and build teaching and research competences accordingly.

- AC should design a more systematic framework for research and applied research within the institution by:
  - Clearly distinguishing between research, consulting and other service activities.
  - Developing, communicating, monitoring and evaluating a long-term strategy for research and applied research.
  - Providing guidelines to define the different types of studies and research activities that academic staff can carry out, with separate objectives and production targets at the level of individuals, research groups and departmental/disciplinary organisational units.
  - Establishing research targets for each category of research and for each strategic research direction aligned with the strategic objectives of the institution and the regional development strategy.
  - Providing effective support for research activities and developing incentive policies for academic staff to pursue the targets set via providing research funding and research facilities.
- AC should define methodological standards to include research-based teaching into the course syllabi.
- AC should design and implement a strategic plan for internationalisation that identifies the thematic areas, target countries and actions needed to foster strategic and systematic international collaborations with partner institutions.
- To effectively pursue its internationalisation objectives, AC should diffuse and enhance foreign language skills among all internal stakeholder groups, including students, academic and administrative staff.
- See also the related recommendations regarding strategic planning in the Management Section and quality assurance measures in the Quality Assurance section.

### 2.3. Impact on regional and national development

*Impact on regional and national development* area is analysed in accordance to the following indicators and criteria, set up in the Methodology.

#### *4.1. Effectiveness of the impact on regional and national development:*

*4.1.1. The higher education institution carries out an analysis of national and (or) regional demands, identifies the needs to be met and foresees the potential impact on national and (or) regional development;*

*4.1.2. The monitoring, analysis and evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures on national and (or) regional development are performed.*

117. In its Vision, AC aims to become an institution that successfully operates at the national and international levels. Its SDP and the Panel's meetings with the internal and external stakeholders of the College clearly demonstrate that it currently aims to exert impact primarily at the regional level.

118. The 2011 institutional review panel recommended that AC clarify its future regional policy and highlight the priorities for future involvement in the region. As the Panel learned during the site visit, such a policy has not been designed; it would not provide an added value as regional development activities of the College are guided by the SDP. In its SDP, AC aims to provide study programmes responding to the needs of the regional labour market and society (see the Studies and research section), and to expand mutually beneficial cooperation with businesses and local government. In the Panel's view, like for other areas covered by the SDP, the objectives are too broad to indicate priorities, define what AC seeks to achieve and measure achievement. (See the related comments in the Management section).

119. National policy documents (e.g. Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030") set a broader framework for the activities of the College. Regional development needs are identified based on policy documents (e.g. Development Vision of the Alytus Region and Alytus Regional Development Plan and Strategic Development Plan of the Alytus City Municipality), through the direct involvement of AC management and staff in local and regional government bodies responsible for policy development, and through a dialogue with social partners in various settings. Based on this, AC, for example, established the study programme in General Practice Nursing; set up the Junior IT Specialists Academy within its structure (see the Introduction); offers various non-formal education courses; and is planning to develop a study programme in renewable energy, and to conduct applied research on renewable energy sources as a priority for the next year. This demonstrates that AC is responsive to the needs identified by its social partners. However, its approach is reactive rather than pro-active. While AC conducted some surveys on an ad-hoc basis, no mechanism is in place for a systematic analysis of needs in all areas of its activity, including applied research, consultancy and lifelong learning (and for study programmes; see Studies and Research). The reliance on the social partners collaborating with the College also narrows down the range of sectors that might help the College to identify needs and determine the demand for its services. AC could review its existing partnerships in the context of local and regional development priorities to identify sectors that are not yet represented in its network.

120. The external stakeholders whom the Panel met mentioned renewable energy, laser technology, composite materials and social work as the areas where AC could or should develop new study programmes. They also emphasised that the region had been growing by attracting investment from industry. In the context of the regional development priorities and future investment directions, the Panel supports the idea of the AC Council to develop a programme in Manufacturing.

121. Although its applied research has yet to be developed into a strength (see Studies and Research), the extent of regional engagement of the College is impressive in terms of both the number and variety of activities, and some collaborations also extend beyond the regional level. Between 2016 and 2021, AC signed 1,171 commercial agreements with businesses, national, regional and local public institutions, higher education institutions and schools, and various other organisations and individuals. While higher education is its core area of activity, AC provides research or consulting services in all areas of its study programmes, including information engineering, transport engineering, construction engineering, business and management, food technologies, nursing, obstetrics and rehabilitation. Its lifelong learning

activities involve a wide range of target groups (see below). It also contributes to the dissemination of knowledge by (co-)organising conferences on various topics, and its staff and students regularly (co-)organise or participate in scientific events (e.g. Let it Be night, Researchers' Night). They are also involved in a wide range of volunteering activities such as Food Bank, environment clean-up actions, quizzes for schools on environmental issues, volunteer training programmes for secondary schools, and work in a hospice.

122. For the external stakeholders whom the Panel met, including regional and local government and business representatives, the College has a crucial role in the development of the region. First and foremost, as the only higher education institution in the region, it provides graduates to meet the demand for professionals in various sectors, from transport to healthcare. For study programmes of particular relevance to the needs such as General Practice Nursing, the local authorities have provided funding for practical training equipment; this has proved to be a good investment during the COVID-19 pandemic, much appreciated by local hospitals and clinics. AC graduates are also perceived as a key to attracting investment and business. Two other areas where, in the stakeholders' view, ACs' activities have had tangible and considerable impact are local and regional policy development, as AC staff share their expertise as members of various bodies, and lifelong learning.

123. The graduates whom the Panel met consider that they were overall well-prepared for their first job (even though teaching materials for some courses (e.g. automobile engineering) at AC had been slightly outdated), and this is mainly thanks to robust practical training as part of their study programmes. The social and business partners interviewed value highly the knowledge and skills of both the students who undertake internships in their organisations and the graduates whom they employ later, even if some on-the-job training is still needed to carry out specific tasks.

124. The effectiveness of measures designed to achieve impact on regional and / or national development is evaluated as part of annual reviews of the implementation of the SDP. As noted in the Management section, effective mechanisms for monitoring during the year have yet to be put in place. The related indicators in the SDP include the target percentage of newly enrolled students coming from, and graduates employed in, the region; and the number of cooperation agreements signed, lectures delivered by business representatives and commissioned final research projects. Based on the 2020 Annual Activity Report, the College achieved or exceeded the target values set for the indicators. However, as in the other areas of the SDP, the indicators focus on inputs (agreements, projects, lectures), and thus, do not allow AC to measure outputs, outcomes or impact of the activities that it has carried out. The Panel's meeting with the social partners and some examples of how the applied research and consultancy services of the College have benefitted customers, provided in the SER, indicate that the College can provide much evidence to demonstrate the impact of its services to the region. As surveys and ad-hoc dialogue meetings would not necessarily enable the College to identify and measure the entire impact, it would need to develop a wider range of mechanisms to collect evidence.

#### *4.2. Assurance of conditions for lifelong learning:*

- 4.2.1. The higher education institution monitors and analyses the need for lifelong learning;*
- 4.2.2. The higher education institution anticipates the diversity of forms and conditions of lifelong learning and ensures their implementation;*
- 4.2.3. The higher education institution performs the evaluation of assurance of conditions for lifelong learning.*

125. The mission statement of AC highlights its lifelong learning engagement, but the SDP does not define any specific objectives, activities or indicators for this area of activity. Like in the other core areas of its activity. AC has not identified any priority areas for its current or future lifelong learning activities. (See the related comments on strategic planning in the Management section).

126. AC conducted surveys among public servants and school education staff to develop customised training courses when it was commissioned to do so. However, it does not have a mechanism in place for regular assessment of lifelong learning needs of its potential target groups, and in particular medium- and long-term labour market needs (see the related comments on regional needs assessment in the previous sections). Like in the case of other services offered to the region, it responds to the needs when they are expressed by stakeholders rather than taking a pro-active and forward-looking approach. With rapid changes on the labour market, such a short-term approach does not enable a timely response of the College to address skills shortages, and also leaves too little time for its teachers or trainers to enhance their competence where this is needed to provide training to stakeholders. Some of the stakeholders whom the Panel met suggested that AC would need to be faster in responding to training needs.

127. The impressive level of lifelong learning engagement of the College is well illustrated by the total number of 1,291 training programmes (over 250 on average annually) run for 37,116 adult learners between 2016/2017 and 2020/2021. The number of programmes slightly decreased when the training services for public servants were liberalised in 2019, public funding for the training of school education staff was reduced, and, recently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

128. AC offers a wide variety of learning opportunities in terms of thematic areas, forms of learning, target groups and funding sources. Until 2019, as an accredited public service training organisation, it provided training to public servants commissioned by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Each month, the AC Teacher Qualification Improvement Division, accredited by the Ministry of Education, organises training courses and events for school education staff. Each year, the College runs around 10 competence development programmes and seminars on various topics for the regional business community and other stakeholders (e.g. legislation, retraining for new jobs; IT, foreign language and leadership skills). In recent years, AC has also tendered successfully to provide training to companies and various institutions and organisations. These include, for example, motivational sessions for the unemployed, training in sustainable environment for transport and automobile service for enterprises, and computer literacy courses and various seminars for teachers and learners of the Third Age University, funded by the local and regional government bodies; courses on volunteering for a local

hospital; and social care training for local and regional institutions providing social services. The AC Junior IT Specialists Academy runs 20-40 training programmes and other activities (projects, competitions, exhibitions) for 5-12 class students each year. In the AC STEAM Open Access Centre, which started its activities in 2021, secondary school students conduct experimental research as part of classes and extracurricular activities and learn about scientific innovations.

129. AC seeks to attract young people either directly by, for example, visiting secondary schools and participating in various regional and local events or via the local and regional authorities. The Panel encourages the College to take active marketing measures to promote the lifelong learning opportunities offered to potential target groups of adult learners.

130. Each training course or event is evaluated by participants through an online satisfaction survey or verbally, and the Applied Research and Non-Formal Education Centre analyses findings and initiates improvements. Based on the feedback collected, it has uploaded all course materials onto the Moodle platform. To conduct an overall evaluation of its lifelong learning activities, AC would first need to design a coherent framework for this area of its activity, including the elements mentioned above and indicators for impact assessment. The questionnaires for surveys currently carried out among trainees may need to be redesigned to provide evidence for impact indicators and, like for other services, would need to be combined with a wider range of methods for the collection of data for impact assessment.

131. **In summary**, AC has strong links with its regional stakeholders, offers a wide range of services and lifelong learning opportunities and is perceived by its stakeholders as a key player in regional development. It is responsive to the needs identified by its stakeholders, but it does not have clear priorities for its regional engagement based on a systematic needs assessment nor mechanisms in place for assessing the impact of its activities. The issues identified in this area are rooted in the limited strategic planning and management capacities of the College.

132. **Judgment:** the area is being developed systematically, without any major drawbacks, and is given 3 points.

133. **Recommendations for the area:**

- AC should conduct a more systematic analysis of needs in relation to its regional development activities, including applied research, consulting services and lifelong learning activities.
- AC should develop mechanisms, which extend beyond surveys and informal and unstructured dialogue with the social partners, and indicators to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of its regional development activities.
- AC should develop a coherent framework for the development of its lifelong learning activities, including future priority areas based on an analysis of medium- and long-term labour market needs, and for the assessment of their impact.
- See also the related recommendations regarding strategic planning in the Management Section, and needs analysis in relation to study programmes in the Studies and Research section.

#### 134. **Good practice examples:**

- AC is commended for its commitment to regional development and lifelong learning provision.

### **IV. EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE**

The Panel identifies the following examples of good practice in the areas of Management and Impact on regional and national development:

#### **Management**

- Consistent and successful efforts to diversify income streams.

#### **Impact on regional and national development**

- Commitment to regional development and lifelong learning provision.

### **V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCEMENT**

The Panel offers the following recommendations for further enhancement:

#### **Management**

- AC should, as a matter of priority, ensure that all relevant stakeholders are represented on its Council. It should also ensure better integration of students and encourage their more active participation in governance and, in particular, in decision-making processes.
- AC should revise its mission statement to make it more specific and highlight unique features of the College and thus to guide the strategic management of AC.
- AC should develop a coherent framework for strategic planning, and review and revise its Strategic Development Plan to include a suitable context analysis, covering both the external and internal environments, and set SMART objectives, appropriate indicators and aligned action plans, supported by an adequate monitoring and reporting system.
- AC should revise the indicators in the Strategic Development Plan that refer to the number of students and graduates so that they are correlated with the labour market analysis and the projected demand for professionals in specific sectors and fields identified in collaboration with external stakeholders.
- AC should ensure the accountability of its governing bodies for the performance of their functions and develop a mechanism for regular review and evaluation of the effectiveness of its governing bodies.
- AC should enhance its analytical capacities to support evidence-based decision-making. AC should develop a systematic approach to data collection and analysis, aggregation and disaggregation and usage and cross-referencing to further support its analytical capacities. Findings from data analysis should lead to clearly formulated

recommendations for follow-up action, and information on findings, recommendations and follow-up actions taken should be easily available to internal and external stakeholders.

- AC should clearly define and communicate expectations for academic staff in terms of research, support to administration and community service, including research targets in terms of the number, type and quality levels of publications expected.
- AC should formalise its performance appraisal system for administrative staff, academic staff and management, and integrate the expectations set for academic staff into the performance appraisal. It should also link its performance appraisal system to its professional development activities and systematically evaluate the impact of professional development support.
- AC should design a staff development strategy that ensures an adequate balance between practical experience and research potential. Priority should be given to increasing the number of academic staff employed on a full-time basis.
- Budget planning and funding allocations for the units should be closely related to clear and specific strategic goals and priorities and based on a related analysis of development needs of each unit.

### **Quality assurance**

- AC should review and revise its quality assurance system to ensure its full compliance with Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. In doing so, it should ensure, in particular, that student-centred learning, teaching and assessment are properly understood and adequately addressed in the quality assurance system.
- AC should develop and implement a mechanism that regularly assesses its quality assurance system in terms of its robustness and effectiveness with a view to establishing a system that focuses on quality enhancement. The review should also address the effectiveness of the procedures designed to ensure compliance with ethical standards.
- AC should develop a mechanism for students and staff to regularly provide feedback on institutional matters.
- AC should publish information on follow-up action taken in response to the feedback collected.
- As a matter of priority, AC should ensure that the QA Department is adequately staffed.
- AC should extend its quality assurance system so that it fully covers all aspects of the operations of the College, including administration, governance, leadership, research and community service.
- AC should formalise the review of administrative units as part of its quality assurance system.
- AC should ensure systematic follow-up from quality assurance activities, including recommendations from external reviews.

### **Studies and research (art)**

- AC should analyse root causes of the steady and significant decline in the numbers of students enrolled on its study programmes with a view to ensuring the sustainability of its current and future programme portfolio.
- AC should shift to a more pro-active and forward-looking approach to programme development based on a systematic analysis of medium- and long-term needs of the regional labour market, and build teaching and research competences accordingly.
- AC should design a more systematic framework for research and applied research within the institution by:
  - Clearly distinguishing between research, consulting and other service activities.
  - Developing, communicating, monitoring and evaluating a long-term strategy for research and applied research.
  - Providing guidelines to define the different types of studies and research activities that academic staff can carry out, with separate objectives and production targets at the level of individuals, research groups and departmental/disciplinary organisational units.
  - Establishing research targets for each category of research and for each strategic research direction aligned with the strategic objectives of the institution and the regional development strategy.
  - Providing effective support for research activities and developing incentive policies for academic staff to pursue the targets set via providing research funding and research facilities.
- AC should define methodological standards to include research-based teaching into the course syllabi.
- AC should design and implement a strategic plan for internationalisation that identifies the thematic areas, target countries and actions needed to foster strategic and systematic international collaborations with partner institutions.
- To effectively pursue its internationalisation objectives, AC should diffuse and enhance foreign language skills among all internal stakeholder groups, including students, academic and administrative staff.

### **Impact on regional and national development**

- AC should conduct a more systematic analysis of needs in relation to its regional development activities, including applied research, consulting services and lifelong learning activities.
- AC should develop mechanisms, which extend beyond surveys and informal and unstructured dialogue with the social partners, and indicators to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of its regional development activities.
- AC should develop a coherent framework for the development of its lifelong learning activities, including future priority areas based on an analysis of medium- and long-term labour market needs, and for the assessment of their impact.

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